

Rules of the Game

Ranged Attacks (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Players can experience an undeniable excitement when player characters come to grips with a foe in melee combat. Many regard the exchange of blows at close range as the ultimate test of a character's mettle. Sometimes, however, you may find it best to keep your foes at a distance, and sometimes a foe remains stubbornly out of melee reach.

Fighting at range usually isn't too difficult; all you need is the right equipment and a clear field of fire. If your foe is rude enough to hide behind something solid, however, such as a rock, tree, or one of your allies, things can get complicated. This series examines ranged combat in general and looks at those times when fighting at a distance proves more difficult than just pointing and shooting.

The Language of Ranged Attacks

Let's start off with a few terms that you'll encounter in this article.

Ammunition: Projectiles propelled from a device, such as a sling or bow. Ammunition often breaks when fired, so you can't count on reusing it.

Concealment: Anything that keeps an attacker from clearly seeing the defender, such as fog, darkness, or a magical effect. Concealment doesn't improve a defender's Armor Class, but it can make an attack miss.

Cover: A barrier between an attacker and defender. The barrier could be an object, creature, or magical effect. A defender behind cover gains a **bonus** to **Armor Class**.

Iterative Attack: One or more extra attacks a character gains when using the full attack action by virtue of a high **base attack bonus**; see pages 22 and 143 in the *Player's Handbook*.

From page 22 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Base Attack Bonus: On an attack roll, apply the bonus from the appropriate column on Table 3-1 according to the class to which the character belongs. Whether a character uses the first (good) base attack bonus, the second (average) base attack bonus, or the third (poor) base attack bonus depends on his or her class. Barbarians, fighters, paladins, and rangers have a good base attack bonus, so they use the first Base Attack Bonus column. Clerics, druids, monks, and rogues have an average base attack bonus, so they use the second column. Sorcerers and wizards have a poor base attack bonus, so they use the third column. Numbers after a slash indicate additional attacks at reduced bonuses: "+12/+7/+2" means three attacks per round, with an attack bonus of +12 for the first attack, +7 for the second, and +2 for the third. Any modifiers on attack rolls apply to all these attacks normally, but bonuses do not grant extra attacks. For example, when Lidda the halfling rogue is 2nd level, she has a base attack bonus of +1. With a thrown weapon, she adds her Dexterity bonus (+3), her size bonus (+1), and a racial bonus (+1) for a total of +6. Even though a +6 base attack bonus would grant an additional attack at +1, raising that number to +6 via ability, racial, size, weapon, or other bonuses doesn't grant Lidda an additional attack. If a character has more than one class (see Multiclass Characters, page 59), the base attack

bonuses for each class are cumulative.

From page 143 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Full Attack

If you get more than one attack per round because your base attack bonus is high enough, because you fight with two weapons or a double weapon (see Two-Weapon Fighting under Special Attacks, page 160), or for some special reason (such as a feat or a magic item), you must use a full-round action to get your additional attacks. You do not need to specify the targets of your attacks ahead of time. You can see how the earlier attacks turn out before assigning the later ones.

The only movement you can take during a full attack is a 5-foot step. You may take the step before, after, or between your attacks.

If you get multiple attacks because your base attack bonus is high enough, you must make the attacks in order from highest bonus to lowest. If you are using two weapons, you can strike with either weapon first. If you are using a double weapon, you can strike with either part of the weapon first.

You can use iterative attacks with a **ranged weapon** only if don't need to use an **action** to reload or otherwise recharge your ranged weapon.

Line of Effect: A straight, unblocked line between two locations on the battlefield. To aim a ranged attack at a target, you must have line of effect to that target.

In general, it takes a solid object to block line of effect. Magical effects that function just like solid objects, such as *walls of force*, also block line of effect.

Creatures usually do not block line of effect, except for very odd creatures, such as gelatinous cubes, that can completely fill a **space**.

Miss Chance: A d% roll to determine if an attack misses when a miss chance applies (such as when a defender has concealment). A **miss chance roll** is made separately from the **attack roll**. If the d% roll indicates a miss, the attack fails even if the attack roll is successful.

Projectile Weapon: A ranged weapon that propels the missile for you, such as a bow or crossbow.

Ranged Attack: An attack you make at a distance. Your target for a ranged attack usually lies beyond your melee **reach**, but it doesn't have to.

Range Increment: A fraction of the maximum distance a ranged weapon can reach and a measure of the projectile's loss of accuracy over that distance.

Thrown Weapon: A ranged weapon you use without a device for propelling the missile -- you just toss the weapon from your hand.

Ranged Attack Basics

A full understanding of ranged attacks requires quite a tour through the rulebooks. The first stop is the attack entry on pages 139-140 of the *Player's Handbook*. Other essential stops include the discussion of ranged weapons on page 112, the range increment entry on page 114, the weapon descriptions on pages 114-122, the discussion of range penalties on page 134, and the sections on cover and concealment starting on page 150.

Selected excerpts from pages 139-140 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Ranged Attacks: With a ranged weapon, you can shoot or throw at any target that is within the weapon's maximum range and in line of sight. The maximum range for a thrown weapon is five range increments. For projectile weapons, it is ten range increments. Some ranged weapons have shorter maximum ranges, as specified in their descriptions.

Multiple Attacks: A character who can make more than one attack per round must use the full attack action (see Full-Round Actions, below) in order to get more than one attack.

Shooting or Throwing into a Melee: If you shoot or throw a ranged weapon at a target engaged in melee with a friendly character, you take a -4 penalty on your attack roll because you have to aim carefully to avoid hitting your friend. Two characters are engaged in melee if they are enemies of each other and either threatens the other. (An unconscious or otherwise immobilized character is not considered engaged unless he is actually being attacked.)

If your target (or the part of your target you're aiming at, if it's a big target) is at least 10 feet away from the nearest friendly character, you can avoid the -4 penalty, even if the creature you're aiming at is engaged in melee with a friendly character.

Precise Shot: If you have the Precise Shot feat (page 98), you don't take this penalty.

Selected excerpts from pages 112-114 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Melee and Ranged Weapons: Melee weapons are used for making melee attacks, though some of them can be thrown as well. Ranged weapons are thrown weapons or projectile weapons that are not effective in melee.

Thrown Weapons: Daggers, clubs, shortspears, spears, darts, javelins, throwing axes, light hammers, tridents, shuriken, and nets are thrown weapons. The wielder applies his or her Strength modifier to damage dealt by thrown weapons (except for splash weapons, such as a vial of acid; see Throw Splash Weapon, page 158). It is possible to throw a weapon that isn't designed to be thrown (that is, a melee weapon that doesn't have a numeric entry in the Range Increment column on Table 7-5), but a character who does so takes a -4 penalty on the attack roll. Throwing a light or onehanded weapon is a standard action, while throwing a two-handed weapon is a full-round action. Regardless of the type of weapon, such an attack scores a threat (a possible critical hit) only on a natural roll of 20 and deals double damage on a critical hit. Such a weapon has a range increment of 10 feet.

Projectile Weapons: Light crossbows, slings, heavy crossbows, shortbows, composite shortbows, longbows, composite longbows, hand crossbows, and repeating crossbows are projectile weapons. Most projectile weapons require two hands to use (see specific weapon descriptions later in this chapter). A character gets no Strength bonus on damage rolls with a projectile weapon unless it's a specially built composite shortbow, specially built composite longbow, or sling. If the character has a penalty for low

Strength, apply it to damage rolls when he or she uses a bow or a sling.

Ammunition: Projectile weapons use ammunition: arrows (for bows), bolts (for crossbows), or sling bullets (for slings). When using a bow, a character can draw ammunition as a free action; crossbows and slings require an action for reloading. Generally speaking, ammunition that hits its target is destroyed or rendered useless, while normal ammunition that misses has a 50% chance of being destroyed or lost.

Although they are thrown weapons, shuriken are treated as ammunition for the purposes of drawing them, crafting masterwork or otherwise special versions of them (see Masterwork Weapons, below), and what happens to them after they are thrown.

Range Increment: Any attack at less than this distance is not penalized for range, so an arrow from a shortbow (range increment 60 feet) can strike at an enemy 59 feet away or closer with no penalty. However, each full range increment imposes a cumulative -2 penalty on the attack roll. A shortbow archer firing at a target 200 feet away takes a -6 penalty on the attack roll (-2 x 3, because 200 feet is at least three range increments but not four). A thrown weapon, such as a throwing axe, has a maximum range of five range increments. A projectile weapon, such as a bow, can shoot out to ten range increments.

Selected excerpts from page 134 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Range Penalty: The range penalty for a ranged weapon depends on the weapon and the distance to the target. All ranged weapons have a range increment, such as 10 feet for a thrown dart or 100 feet for a longbow (see Table 7-5: Weapons, page 116). Any attack from a distance of less than one range increment is not penalized for range, so an arrow from a shortbow (range increment 60 feet) can strike at enemies up to 59 feet away with no penalty. However, each full range increment causes a cumulative -2 penalty on the attack roll. A shortbow archer firing at a target 200 feet away takes a -6 penalty on his attack roll (because 200 feet is at least three range increments but not four increments).

Thrown weapons, such as throwing axes, have a maximum range of five range increments. Projectile weapons, such as bows, can shoot up to ten increments.

Selected excerpts from pages 150-152 of the *Player's Handbook*:

COVER

One of the best defenses available is cover. By taking cover behind a tree, a wall, the side of a wagon, or the battlements of a castle, you can protect yourself from attacks, especially ranged attacks, and also from being spotted. To determine whether your target has cover from your ranged attack, choose a corner of your square. If any line from this corner to any corner of the target's square passes through a square or border that blocks line of effect or provides cover, or through a square occupied by a creature, the target has cover (+4 to AC).

When making a melee attack against an adjacent target, your target has cover if any line from your square to the target's square goes through a wall (including a low wall). When making a melee attack against a target that isn't adjacent to you (such as with a reach weapon), use the rules for determining cover from ranged attacks.

CONCEALMENT

Besides cover, another way to avoid attacks is to make it hard for opponents to know where you are. Concealment encompasses all circumstances where nothing physically blocks a blow or shot but where something interferes with an attacker's accuracy. Concealment gives the subject of a successful attack a chance that the attacker missed because of the concealment.

Typically, concealment is provided by fog, smoke, a shadowy area, darkness, tall grass, foliage, or magical effects that make it difficult to pinpoint a target's location.

To determine whether your target has concealment from your ranged attack, choose a corner of your square. If any line from this corner to any corner of the target's square passes through a square or border that provides concealment, the target has concealment. When making a melee attack against an adjacent target, your target has concealment if his space is entirely within an effect that grants concealment (such as a cloud of smoke). When making a melee attack against a target that isn't adjacent to you (for instance, with a reach weapon), use the rules for determining concealment from ranged attacks.

In addition, some magical effects (such as the *blur* and *displacement* spells) provide concealment against all attacks, regardless of whether any intervening concealment exists.

Concealment Miss Chance: Concealment gives the subject of a successful attack a 20% chance that the attacker missed because of the concealment. If the attacker hits, the defender must make a miss chance percentile roll to avoid being struck. (To expedite play, make both rolls at the same time.) Multiple concealment conditions (such as a defender in a fog and under the effect of a *blur* spell) do not stack.

Here's a summary, along with a few additional notes.

- You make a ranged attack with a projectile or thrown weapon.

To determine if a weapon is suitable for ranged attacks, check the weapon's description and Table 7-5 in the *Player's Handbook* (or the equivalent in the rulebook where you found the weapon). Most ranged weapons are clearly labeled as such. Melee weapons suitable for throwing have range increments in their entries.

You need the proper ammunition when firing a projectile weapon. For example, you can't fire a crossbow bolt from a bow or an arrow from a crossbow.

If you want to throw something that's not a ranged weapon, you might have to use it as an improvised weapon; see page 113 in the *Player's Handbook* and also see Part Two.

From page 113 of the *Player's Handbook*:

Improvised Weapons: Sometimes objects not crafted to be weapons nonetheless see use in combat -- people fight with anything from broken bottles to chair legs to thrown mugs. Because such objects are not designed for this use, any creature that uses one in combat is considered to be nonproficient with it and takes a -4 penalty on attack rolls made with that object. To determine the size category and appropriate damage for an improvised weapon, the DM should compare its relative size and damage potential to the weapon list to find a reasonable match. For instance, a table leg is similar to a club, while a broken bottle is similar to a dagger. An improvised weapon scores a threat (a possible critical hit) on a natural roll of 20 and deals double damage on a critical hit. An improvised thrown weapon has a range increment of 10 feet.

- Every ranged weapon has a range increment.

A ranged weapon's range increment is shown on Table 7-5 in the *Player's Handbook* (or the equivalent in the rulebook where you found the weapon).

As noted earlier, a range increment is both a fraction of the maximum distance a ranged weapon can shoot and a measure of the accuracy the shot loses over that distance.

A projectile weapon can fire a distance equal to 10 range increments. For example, a shortbow, with a range increment of 60 feet, can fire a maximum of 600 feet. A thrown weapon can reach a maximum distance of five range increments. A dagger, with a range increment of 10 feet, can be thrown a maximum of 50 feet.

For every full range increment of distance between you and your target, you take a cumulative -2 **penalty** on the attack roll. For example, if you fire a shortbow at a target 50 feet away, you have no attack penalty from range (because the distance is less than a full range increment). If the target is exactly 60 feet away, your attack penalty for range would be -2 (for one range increment). A target 90 feet away would still have an attack penalty for range of -2 (one full range increment, but not two). A target 600 feet away would have an attack penalty of -20 (for 10 full range increments).

Some ranged weapons have different maximum ranges than the general rule specifies. If so, the weapon's description will note the exception.

- Ranged attacks provoke **attacks of opportunity**.

You drop your guard when you prepare for your shot and take aim. This provokes attacks of opportunity from every foe who threatens you at the time you make your ranged attack.

You can avoid the attack of opportunity in several ways, such as taking a **5-foot step** to leave the threatened space or standing behind cover when you shoot (see page 151 in the *Player's Handbook*).

- Dexterity governs ranged attacks.

Your **Dexterity** bonus (or penalty) applies to your attack roll when you make a ranged attack. Your **Strength** bonus might or might not apply to the damage you deal with a successful ranged attack. Your Strength bonus (or penalty) applies to the damage you deal with most thrown weapons and to some projectile weapons (such as slings and composite bows), as noted in the weapon's description. See Part Two for details.

- It's difficult to fire into a melee.

When your target is engaged in melee with one or more of your allies, you take a -4 penalty on your attack roll because you must be careful where you shoot. The Precise Shot feat allows you to ignore this penalty, and you can get around it in other ways; see Part Four.

The penalty you take for firing into a melee stacks with any other penalties that apply to the shot, such as range or the target's cover. See [Rules of the Game: Does It Stack?](#) for more on stacking penalties.

- Cover often affects ranged attacks.

Because you often have a great deal of distance between you and the target you've chosen for your ranged attack, cover frequently intervenes. Usually, a target with cover gains a +4 bonus to its Armor Class when it has cover. See Part Four for details.

- A variety of things qualify as ranged attacks.

The rules for ranged attacks, including feats that affect ranged attacks, can apply to many spells and other effects; see Part Four for details.

What's Next?

That wraps up our look at ranged attack basics. Next week, we'll look at thrown weapons in detail.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.